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A TALE OF OLD JAPAN

BY ALFRED NOYES

A TALE OF OLD JAPAN

With an Introduction in
Memory of Samuel Coleridge Taylor

By

ALFRED NOYES

Illustrated by Kate Riches
Transcribed by Joan Ewen

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'A Tale of Old Japan' is reprinted from the 'Collected Poems' by Alfred Noyes (Vol. II., p. 308), where it is entitled "The Two Painters: A Tale of Old Japan."

DEDICATION.

THE appearance of this poem in its present form is due chiefly to the demand created for it by a vanished hand. It was set to music as a cantata by Coleridge Taylor, some years ago. He thought it his best work. Hardly a week has passed since then without some performance of it, in some part of the world; and it may be said that the music he wrote for it has won the lasting affection of the thousands that have heard it. He was, in two works, the most vital and spontaneous musician of his time. The first was his youthful setting of Longfellow's 'Hiawatha.' Then came many years of experiment with European subjects, disappointment, and apparent failure. In the Eastern theme of 'A Tale of Old Japan' he found something which (as those who know his history will understand) enabled him to draw the bow across his own heart-strings,

and, from the first note to the last, he gave in it the most pathetic, the most haunting expression, to his own spirit. To me it was a most moving fact that his great genius should have shown so scrupulous and infinitely painstaking a regard for the words of the poem. He submitted to their "narrow room," but in a way that suggests quite new possibilities in the wedding of music and verse. He preserved every cadence of every line, and yet he gave the freedom of music to the whole, in a way that poets had ceased to think possible. It is therefore to his memory that I would dedicate the poem, all too poor a chrysalis as it must seem for those exquisite wings.

A TALE OF OLD JAPAN

I

Yoichi Tenko, the painter,
Dwelt by the purple sea,
Painting the peacock islands
Under his willow-tree;
Also in temples he painted
Dragons of old Japan,
With a child to look at the pictures—
Little O Kimi San.

Kimi, the child of his brother,
Bright as the moon in May,
White as a lotus lily,
Pink as a plum-tree spray,
Linking her soft arm round him
Sang to his heart for an hour,
Kissed him with ripples of laughter
And lips of the cherry flower.

Child of the old pearl-fisher
Lost in his junk at sea,
Kimi was loved of Tenko
As his own child might be,
Yoichi Tenko the painter,
Wrinkled and grey and old,
Teacher of many disciples
That paid for his dreams with gold.

II

Peonies, peonies crowned the May!
Clad in blue and white array
Came Sawara to the school
Under the silvery willow-tree,
All to learn of Tenko!
Riding on a milk-white mule,
Young and poor and proud was he,
Lissom as a cherry spray
[Peonies, peonies crowned the day!]
And he rode the golden way
To the school of Tenko.

Swift to learn, beneath his hand
Soon he watched his wonderland
Growing cloud by magic cloud,
Under the silvery willow-tree
In the school of Tenko:
Kimi watched him, young and proud,
Painting by the purple sea,
Lying on the golden sand
Watched his golden wings expand!
[None but Love will understand
All she hid from Tenko.]

He could paint her tree and flower,
Sea and spray and wizard's tower,
With one stroke, now hard, now soft,
Under the silvery willow-tree
In the school of Tenko:

Lying on the golden sand,
Kimi watched his wings expand:
Wept.—He could not understand
Why she wept, said Tenko.

III

So, in her blue kimono,
Pale as the sickle moon
Glimmered thro' soft plum-branches
Blue in the dusk of June,
Stole she, willing and waning,
Frightened and unafraid,—
"Take me with you, Sawara,
Over the sea", she said.

Small and sadly beseeching,
Under the willow-tree,
Glimmered her face like a foam-flake
Drifting over the sea:
Pale as a drifting blossom,
Lifted her face to his eyes:
Slowly he gathered and held her
Under the drifting skies.

Poor little face cast backward
Better to see his own,
Earth and heaven went past them
Drifting: they too, alone
Stood, immortal. He whispered—
"Nothing can part us two!"
Backward her sad little face went
Drifting, and dreamed it true.

"Others are happy," she murmured,
"Maidens and men I have seen;
You are my king, Sawara,
O, let me be your queen!
If I am all too lowly,"
Sadly she strove to smile,
"Let me follow your footsteps,
Your slave for a little while."

Surely, he thought, I have painted
Nothing so fair as this
Moonlit almond blossom
Sweet to fold and kiss,
Brow that is filled with music,
Shell of a faery sea,
Eyes like the holy violets
Brimmed with dew for me.

"Wait for Sawara" he whispered,
"Does not his whole heart yearn
Now to his moon-bright maiden?
Wait, for he will return
Rich as the wave on the moon's path
Rushing to claim his bride!"
So they plighted their promise,
And the ebbing sea-wave sighed.

IV

Moon and flower and butterfly,
Earth and heaven went drifting by,
Three long years while Kimi dream-
Under the silvery willow-tree ed
In the school of Tenko,
Steadfast while the whole world stream-
Past her tow'rds Eternity; ed
Steadfast till with one great cry,
Ringing to the gods on high,
Golden wings should bind the sky
And bring him back to Tenko.

Three long years and nought to say
"Sweet, I come the golden way,
Riding royally to the school
Under the silvery willow-tree
Claim my bride of Tenko;
Silver bells on a milk-white mule,
Rose-red sails on an emerald sea!"
Kimi sometimes went to pray
In the temple nigh the bay,
Dreamed all night and gazed all day
Over the sea from Tenko.

Far away his growing flame
Lit the clouds. No message came
From the sky, whereon she gazed
Under the silvery willow-tree
Far away from Tenko!
Small white hands in the temple raised
Pleaded with the Mystery—
"Stick of incense in the flame,
Though my love forget my name,
Help him, bless him, all the same,
And ... bring him back to Tenko!"

Rose-white temple nigh the bay,
Hush! for Kimi comes to pray,
Dream all night and gaze all day
Over the sea from Tenko.

V

So, when the rich young merchant
  Showed him his bags of gold,
Yoichi Tenko, the painter,
  Gave him her hand to hold,
Said, "You shall wed him, O Kimi":
  Softly he lied and smiled—
"Yea, for Sawara is wedded!
Let him not mock you, child."

Dumbly she turned and left them,
  Never a word or cry
Broke from her lips' grey petals
  Under the drifting sky:
Down to the spray and the rainbows,
  Where she had watched him of old
Painting the rose-red islands,
  Painting the sand's wet gold

Down to their dreams of sunset,
  Frail as a flower's white ghost,
Lonely and lost she wandered
  Down to the darkening coast;
Lost in the drifting midnight,
  Weeping, desolate, blind,
Many went out to seek her:
  Never a heart could find.

Yoichi Tenko, the painter
  Plucked from his willow-tree
Two big paper lanterns
  And ran to the brink of the sea;
Over his head he held them,
  Crying, and only heard
Somewhere out in the darkness,
  The cry of a wandering bird.

VI

Peonies, peonies thronged the May
When in royal-rich array
Came Sawara to the school
Under the silvery willow-tree—
To the school of Tenko!
Silver bells on a milk-white mule,
Rose-red sails on an emerald sea!
Over the bloom of the cherry spray,
Peonies, peonies dimmed the day;
And he rode the royal way
Back to Yoichi Tenko.

Yoichi Tenko, half afraid
Whispered, "Wed some other maid;
Kimi left me all alone
Under the silvery willow-tree,
Left me," whispered Tenko,
"Kimi had a heart of stone!"—
"Kimi, Kimi? Who is she?
Kimi? Ah, the child that played
Round the willow-tree. She prayed
Often; and, whate'er I said,
She believed it, Tenko."

He had come to paint anew
Those dim isles of rose and blue,
For a palace far away,
Under the silvery willow-tree—
So he said to Tenko;
And he painted, day by day,
Golden visions of the sea.
No, he had not come to woo;
Yet, had Kimi proven true,
Doubtless he had loved her too,
Hardly less than Tenko.

Since the thought was in his head,
He would make his choice and wed;
And a lovely maid he chose
Under the silvery willow-tree.
"Fairer far," said Tenko.
"Kimi had a twisted nose,
And a foot to small, for me,
And her face was dull as lead!"
"Nay, a flower, be it white or red,
Is a flower," Sawara said:
"So it is," said Tenko.

VII

Great Sawara, the painter,
Sought, on a day of days,
One of the peacock islands
Out in the sunset haze:
Rose-red sails on the water
Carried him quickly nigh:
There would he paint him a wonder,
Worthy of Hokusai.

Lo, as he leapt o'er the creaming
Roses of faery foam,
Out of the green-lipped caverns
Under the isle's blue dome,
White as a drifting snow-flake,
White as the moon's white flame,
White as a ghost from the darkness,
Little O Rimi came.

"Long I have waited, Sawara,
Here in our sunset isle,
Sawara, Sawara, Sawara,
Look at me once, and smile:

"Others are happy", she whispered,
"Maidens and men I have seen:
Be happy, be happy, Sawara!
The other - shall be - your queen!
Kiss me one kiss for parting":
Trembling she lifted her head,
Then like a broken blossom
It fell on his arm. She was dead.

VIII

Much impressed, Sawara straight
(Though the hour was growing late)
Made a sketch of Kimi lying
By the lonely, sighing sea,
Brought it back to Tenko.
Tenko looked it over crying
(Under the silvery willow-tree).
"You have burst the golden gate!
You have conquered Time and Fate!
Hokusai is not so great!
This is art", said Tenko!

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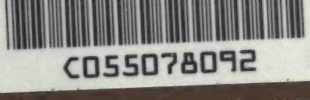

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